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Political Speeches of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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Introduction

Political Discourse (PD) has widely been used by numerous speakers in their presidential campaigns or inaugural speeches as a major tool to argue and persuade the audience/listeners with the desired ideology intended by the speaker. Language, here, plays a pivotal role as the medium to convey and communicate the speaker's hidden ideology. It is quite crucial for the speaker to have a sufficient linguistic capacity or faculty in order to be able to converse, argue, counter-argue and deliver the message very clearly. According to Woods (2006), political discourse depends greatly on devices frequently used in advertising at the levels of sound, words and syntax which are key elements in arranging political messages for achieving the maximum desired effect. These elements (and others) are interwoven and layered to manipulate the meanings of political messages. During campaigns, linguistic techniques, that help politicians to achieve their aims, such as persuasion, rational argument, irrational strategies, threats, entreaties, bribes, manipulation, and so on are used.

Political discourse, as a sub-category of discourse in general, can have two aims: functional and thematic. Political discourse is a result of politics and it is historically and culturally determined. It fulfills different functions due to different political activities. Therefore, political speeches play a fundamental role in persuading and winning over the masses. They are also a means of disseminating the speakers' hidden ideologies. Also, they are

considered as a major tool of raising the level of public awareness towards the oppression, discrimination and coercion that occur in the societies. Furthermore, political discourse has a great impact on people's lives since the ancient times till now. Therefore, the speakers are expected to possess great linguistic ability that helps them communicate their ideas and views to the masses in a convincing way.

The study of language has recently become more central to those academic disciplines concerned with politics. However, language and politics have become inseparable to the extent that makes language an essential tool in politics. It is clear that language and politics are intimately interwoven. However, it is not out of place to argue that other types of behaviour which include physical coercion exist in politics. Nevertheless, political activity does not exist without the use of language. Politics has become a linguistic issue while language has become a political issue.

Generally, African Americans were marginalized in society, and considered second-class inhabitants. However, their political discourse constituted a turning point for the masses. On the other hand, their speeches are considered powerful and prominent in rhetoric and oratory. Those speeches gave voice to those who were voiceless and moved the crowds from ethnically, racially and religiously oppressed societies towards achieving their human rights - such as the right to vote, social justice, equal rights and equal access to public services.

Political discourse is primarily viewed as a form of argumentation since it involves more specifically practical argumentation: argumentation for or against particular ways of acting, argumentation that can ground decisions. It is a highly argumentative discourse which is mainly based on

the linguistic components employed by the speaker. More importantly, the speaker or orator must have high skill and talent in employing the effective linguistic elements to debate, argue and persuade the other minds. Woods (2006) mentions some functions of speech acts which are to protest, legitimize, intimidate, persuade people or lead them to a particular view of political reality and to act in a way that is consistent with this view. Political discourse, then, is not neutral as a medium of communication. It is compared with the discourse of advertising which is designed to lead the audience in the direction of particular thoughts, beliefs, and actions.

The present study would discuss the select political speeches of the three speakers - ten speeches for each one. All of these speakers belong to the African American community on whom all kinds of social injustice, racial discrimination and religious persecution have been inflicted. This is the common point shared by the three political speakers. They are chosen precisely because their speeches have been a milestone in the history of the American society. Their speeches have also played a major role in the human rights movement of the African American community in the US. Also, one of the reasons for choosing this topic is to realize the cultural and ideological background and its effect on the speakers and audience as well.

The current study is basically a comprehensive critical discourse analysis of the select speeches of the three African American speakers: ***Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Barack Obama***. Critical discourse analysis is a multidisciplinary approach that would be adopted to conduct a linguistic study. Accordingly, the researcher's main concern is to do a critical discourse analysis for the linguistic aspects of the select speeches. Moreover, the study intends to investigate the linguistic aspects of the marginalized speakers in the African American context. The speeches

are a kind of discourse, particularly a written discourse; when delivered orally, they have become spoken discourse. Basically, any discourse disseminates ideology and has a specific agenda. The speeches have clearly revealed social inequality, injustice, slavery, oppression and racial discrimination. These practices reflect the real face of America which was decorated to be the land of justice, equality and freedom. These speeches have portrayed the horrible implications of slavery, racial discrimination on the African American people and they reflect their great desire to get freedom and get rid of the oppression and servitude imposed by the privileged whites. In order to achieve their goals, the speakers through these speeches have formed a clear appeal to resist all types of hegemony and deprivation of equal rights. These speakers struggled a lot to make people conscious of their rights and to highlight the discriminatory and hegemonic attitudes of the whites.

As this study is a critical analysis of political discourse, it would focus on the linguistic aspects of the selected speeches. It is known that critical discourse analysis is considered as a multi-disciplinary approach and deals with different disciplines from various perspectives. This study would deal with the linguistic aspect of political discourse; thus, it would be a purely linguistic study. Each speaker has adopted the cultural background and the religious knowledge in his speeches. Therefore, the study would examine the cultural and religious upbringing of each speaker and its influence on the perception of the crowds on one hand and how it has affected their (the speakers') own discourse on the other. More importantly, this study would find out what kind of language/linguistic techniques and devices the speakers have adopted to persuade and convince the mob and catch their attention towards their human and legal rights.

Statement of the Problem

The problem of the study lies in the fact that the political speeches did not get adequate attention of researchers and scholars, as most scholars have not discussed the role of language undertaken to show the reality of the marginalized people. The African American speakers tried to showcase the ongoing conflict, hegemony, marginalization and oppression inflicted on their community. This study would try to focus on the main rule of language as a medium of argumentation and persuasion in bringing out the conflict of racism, power and politics used in the speech text.

Before more than fifty years, the speeches of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. were delivered. However, they are still relevant and inherently pertaining to human life because they basically discuss a fundamental issue that is the constant suffering caused by racial discrimination based on colour, class, creed, caste and religion. So, what is happening these days in America, such as demonstrations, protests and marches is just a simple, natural reaction to the repressive state practices of the (police) white people against members of the African Americans.

The emergence of racial discrimination in the twenty-first century is not a new phenomenon, but it is an extension since the US. President Abraham Lincoln issued the decree of Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863. The proclamation declared “that all persons held as slaves” within the rebellious states “are, and henceforward shall be free.” Since then, there have been many black writers and speakers who tried to raise the voice of the voiceless because they have undergone the same experience of exploitation as a coloured community. They struggled to get their equality, justice freedom to be treated with dignity and to get the same status as the

whites. These writers and speakers were appealing to stop the oppression by whites and dehumanization of the black people. Their words, speeches, novels and writings were the only weapon they used to fight against the hegemony of white people. Most of these writers insisted on the importance of resistance of the hegemony and subjugation of white people.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research lies in the fact that it sheds light on the linguistic aspects of the political discourse and their function in discussing the age-old issue of racial discrimination, social injustice, inequality, and hidden ideology. What makes this study more important is its focus on the role played by language in bringing out the ongoing racial conflict with power and politics within the text of the speech as well as enlightening the audience with their equal rights. Furthermore, this study will be of value to the political analysts and it would open a new area for researchers in the field of discourse and political studies.

The present study, therefore, has arisen from the need to address the significant features of the language of political speeches of the African American speakers, not only through the angle of micro-linguistic structures but also from the perspective of discourse patterns and pragmatic implications, taking into account the ideological, cultural and power patterns encoded in the texts.

Objectives of the Study

The study has the following main objective:

- To investigate the linguistic aspects of the select political speeches of the marginalized (subaltern) African American speakers.

Additionally, it proposes to focus on the following specific objectives:

- To study the linguistic characteristics of the social and cultural processes as reflected in the speeches.
- To examine how the speakers' cultural and religious upbringing influences the audience perception on one hand and how it has affected their/ the speakers' own discourse on the other.
- To identify what kind of language/linguistic techniques and devices the speakers have adopted in the speeches.
- To show how the language functions effectively in guiding and orienting the (audience) listeners' responses towards certain actions (ends).
- To unravel/ expose the hidden meanings and connotations of the texts which raise the public awareness towards social, cultural and political rights in the society.
- To determine the common points shared by the three speakers.

Hypotheses of the Study

- There are linguistic characteristics of the social and cultural processes as reflected in the speeches of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr. and Barack Obama.
- There is an impact of the speakers' cultural and religious upbringing on both the audience perception and on the speakers' own discourse.
- There are certain linguistic techniques and devices that have been adopted by the speakers in their speeches.

- There are hidden meanings and connotations of the texts which raise the public awareness towards the social, cultural and political rights in the society.
- There is an effective language function in guiding and orienting the (audience) listeners' responses towards certain actions.

Questions of the Study

The current study intends to answer the following questions:

- What are the linguistic characteristics of the social and cultural processes as reflected in the speeches?
- To what extent does the speakers' cultural and religious upbringing influence both the audience's perception and the speakers' own discourse as well?
- What kind of language techniques and devices have been adopted by the speakers in the speeches?
- How does the language function effectively in directing the (audience) listeners' responses towards certain actions (ends)?
- What are the traits that are commonly used by the speakers when delivering their speeches?

Review of Literature

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is relatively an emerging model in the field of linguistics and language studies. It aims to investigate multiple functions of communication at all levels of social interaction. The origin of Discourse Analysis can be traced back to the critical theory of Frankfurt in 1970s. Its fundamental implications were based on the idea of developing critical attitude towards the society. The role of a discourse analyst in the

domain of communication is to investigate and expose socio-cultural and political problems of a particular community. CDA is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of discourse that is text and language as a social practice. That is, how text is related to society. It primarily seeks to investigate power relations, hidden ideologies and hegemony. CDA goes beyond linguistic analysis, as might be understood, to project socio-political messages inherent in linguistic expressions and their consequences on the audience. It provokes great awareness about the issue of social power abuse, dominance, inequality and linguistic repression.

Applying Critical Discourse Analysis to any form of text is somewhat investigating the hidden meaning of words used in the context. Historically, this approach is an interdisciplinary model for practising Critical Discourse Analysis. It deeply recognizes the intricacy of an underlying phenomenon between language and society. Fairclough (1989) declares language as a social process implying linguistic and nonlinguistic characteristics of a society. He also realizes that Critical Discourse Analysis is not only an explanatory mode of interpreting and analyzing language, but also a practical tool of resistance against existing discrimination and injustice in society. CDA not only focuses on language and language use, but also on the linguistic characteristics of social and cultural processes. Rather, it follows a critical approach to social problems in its endeavors to make explicit power relationships which are frequently hidden. It aims to derive results which are of practical relevance to the social, cultural, political and even economic contexts (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997).

There are numerous studies that have adopted the approach of critical discourse analysis to underline various aspects and dimensions of different

literary works, political speeches, campaign speeches or presidential speeches.

Opeibi (2004) conducted a study entitled *A Discourse Analysis of the Use of English in the 1993 Presidential Election Campaigns in Nigeria*. This research has mainly focused on the significant features of the language of political advertising in Nigerian politics from the perspective of discourse patterns and pragmatic implications. He has described campaign discourse as a resource organized according to the functions it has evolved to accomplish. According to him, political aspirants in Nigeria used numerous innovative and persuasive strategies to communicate their political messages. He also identified how contextual features function as carriers of meaning within an environment of discourse.

Sipra & Rashid (2013) conducted research on *Critical Discourse Analysis of Martin Luther King's Speech in Socio-Political Perspective.* The study concludes that certain textual and stylistic devices have very frequently been used in the speech to achieve a specific purpose. The speech carried the prerequisites of a speech to propagate certain ideology in a sophisticated manner. It is syntactically well-organized with frequent repetitions emphasizing the main theme, which is inequality of socio-cultural rights and racial discrimination on the basis of colour and creed. With the help of metaphors and other devices, Martin Luther King Jr. has very impressively and successfully identified the relationship between the powerful and the oppressed. Moreover, he very persuasively succeeded in achieving the strength and support of the powerless without initiating any conflict with the powerful. The speech very peacefully shed light on the institutionalized social inequalities.

Another study was carried out by Ibrahim Al-Faki (2014) on *Political Speeches of Some African Leaders from Linguistic Perspective (1981-2013).* The study investigated linguistic elements in political discourses in general and in political speeches, in particular. The study has shown how linguistic tools can be manipulated to expose speakers' ideology and political stance. It has also revealed that politicians use many rhetorical and metaphorical devices that have powerful influence in manipulating the mind of the crowd, covering and softening truths and befogging the thoughts. Politicians also use pronouns and lexical choices as linguistic means to persuade and manipulate the public.

A study by ke-Nwafor, Nkechi Gloria (2015) focused on *A Critical Discourse Analysis of selected political campaign speeches in South-Western Nigeria during the period 2007-2014.* The study reveals that discourse structures have implications of power and ideology in order to expose hidden meanings and messages that are embedded in the linguistic expressions used. The study has also shown the contextual features and background knowledge function as carriers of meaning in discourse production and interpretation. The research also revealed that figurative expressions can be used creatively as strong weapons to persuade voters to support a candidate. The study also found that ideology is deployed as a strategy of negative representation through the enactment of lexical items with negative expressive values. The choice of words or expressions with negative connotations is an attempt by the speaker to present the "other" party in the negative light, deface them and make them unpopular. According to the study, using power as a strategy of domination is mainly achieved through imperatives which allow the speaker to impose his opinion on the others.

Nusrat et al. (2020) conducted a study titled, *Critical Discourse Analysis of Imran Khan Dharna Speeches in Socio-Political Perspective*. The aim of the study was to explore and uncover power played in Dharna 2014 speeches by Imran Khan. The study showed that the power of West and Islam, as power behind discourse, is more dominant in the speeches of Imran Khan. It also revealed that the power display within discourse is shown by the speaker at textual, discursive and societal levels. Using Urdu language has helped him decrease the distance between the speaker and the audience and made the speech comprehensible for the population of Pakistan. The speaker explained in detail the unjust rule of the government by using different linguistic tools like modal verbs, vocabulary, transitivity, inter-discourse, etc.

In analyzing political speeches, however Charteris-Black (2018, p. xiii) argued that "a political speech can be defined as an orderly sequence of words delivered by an individual to a physically present audience assembled for a specific social purpose." It also addresses a wider, remote audience with the means of a range of a communication media. Analyzing political speeches is a main factor to get engaged in public communication that necessitates the mastery of linguistic and conceptual framework for investigating persuasion means that we do not need to be suspicious of a persuasive speaker. At times, suspicion comes from ignorance, and whatever we could not understand frightens us and leads us to doubt.

Methodology

This study would utilize an extensive content analysis; therefore, a descriptive and analytical methodology would be adopted. The qualitative technique would be applied to explore and analyze the speeches. The main

advantage of the qualitative technique is that it provides a broader outlook and observation to highlight the language choices for the speeches through the application of Critical Discourse Analysis and Systemic Functional Linguistics as to make the study more comprehensive and even more flexible.

As far as the data necessary to conduct this study is concerned, it would be derived and collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources such as the original speech texts and secondary sources i.e., printed materials, books, published journal articles, published and unpublished, dissertations and Ph. D. theses, internet, different periodicals, videos, etc. would be utilized for the purpose.

Scope and Limitations of the Study

This study would be linguistic in its scope and it would try to adhere to the linguistic aspects as reflected in the speeches. This study, however, is associated with rhetoric and oratory. Thus, it would intend to investigate the language aspects that accompanied the political speeches by the African American speakers. This study would be limited only to the selected African American political speakers: Malcolm X, Dr. Martin Luther King and Barack Obama. Therefore, a sample of ten speeches for each speaker will be followed. The approach of critical discourse analysis would be adopted to analyze the speech discourse critically.

Chapter Scheme

This study would consist of six chapters:

Chapter I is introduction and it would introduce the main theme of the study. It would justify the background and give an overview of the study.

Further, it would state the significance of the study, hypotheses, objectives and questions of the study. This chapter would also bring to light the scope and limitations of the study. Besides, it would discuss the research methodology followed in the study. It would also give a brief survey of Critical Discourse Analysis in general and Political Discourse Analysis in particular.

Chapter II would discuss the selected speeches of the speaker, Malcolm X. It would focus on how Malcolm X was initially a strict, austere Islamist or an extremist. And this religious extremism had a great impact on his political speeches. He has been seen as a violent and more militant in his vision towards social protest. On the other hand, when converted to be a moderate Islamist, he adopted a moderate religious thought, and this played a prominent role in his speeches thereafter.

Chapter III would deal with the selected speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. In his speeches, King demands for racial justice and an integrated society for America. In his fight as a human rights activist, he attracts the audience with speeches embellished with the effective use of language devices that help to contextualize his ideology. He had a Christian background and was obviously very much influenced by Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence in demonstrations and protests. His Christian upbringing is conspicuous in his speeches.

Chapter IV would deal with selected speeches of Barack Obama. His speeches do not use the traditional style of speech because his political position does not permit him to show any kind of cultural or ideological prejudice towards any community. However, his political discourse calls

upon coexistence, integration, peacefulness in order to maintain and sustain concepts of justice, freedom and equality.

Chapter V would be a type of comparative analysis. It would focus on the similarities that are commonly used by the three speakers. On the other hand, it is an evaluation of the language choices adopted by the three speakers.

Chapter VI is conclusion. It would conclude the study and provide the findings of the research hypotheses as reflected in the speeches discussed in the given research. It summarizes the main arguments made in the preceding chapters and provides some concluding remarks drawn from the study. It would deal with the limitations of the study as well as the scope for further research.

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